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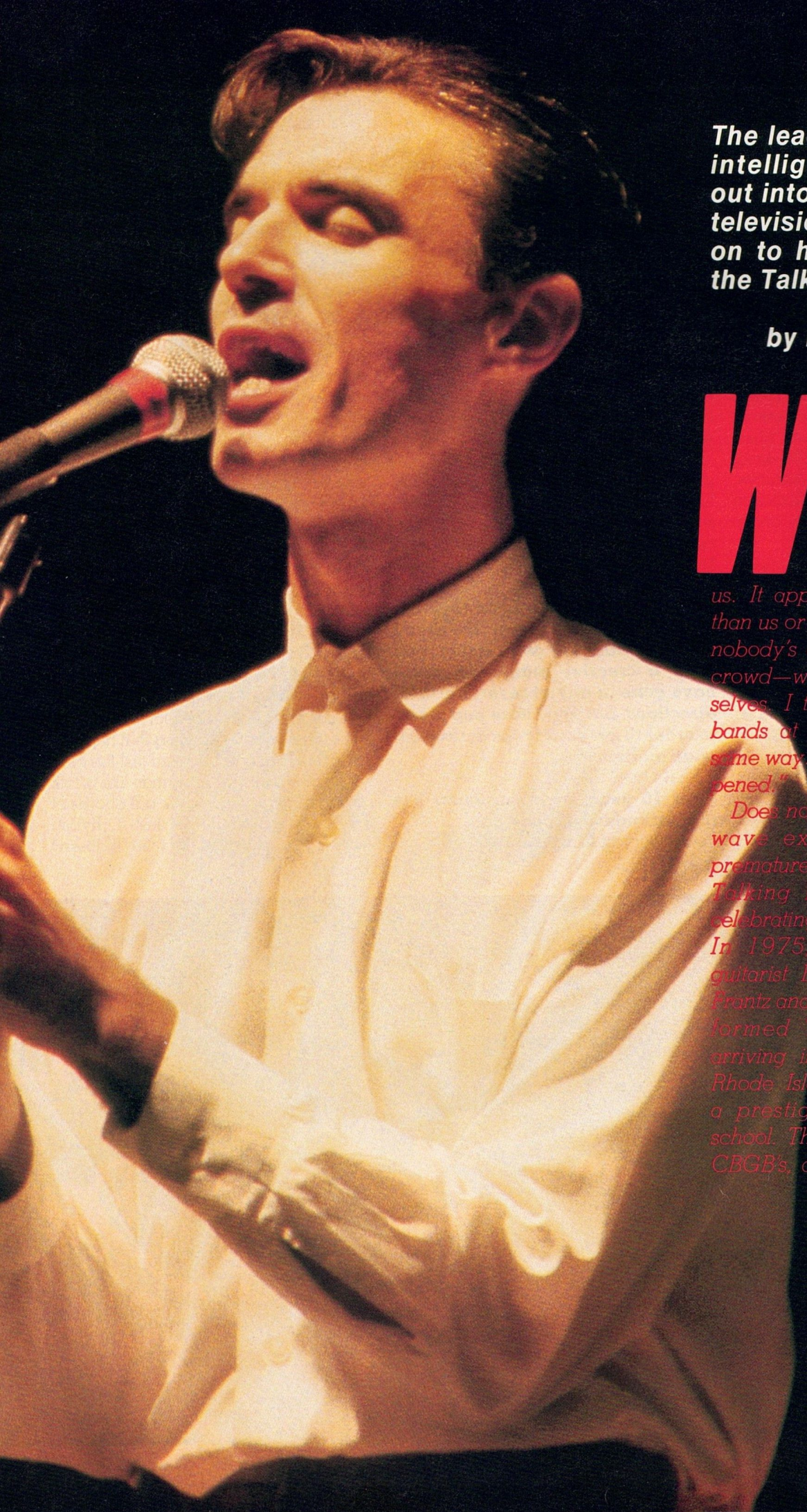

The leader of rock's new intelligentsia branches out into film, theater and television while holding on to his main passion, the Talking Heads.

by Bill Flanagan

"When we began," David Byrne says of Talking Heads, "we felt there was this big hole. Very little we were hearing appealed directly to us. It appealed to kids younger than us or to other people. We felt nobody's doing anything for our crowd—we'll have to do it ourselves. I think a lot of the other bands at the same time felt the same way. Maybe that's what happened."

Does nostalgia for the '76 new-wave explosion seem a bit premature? Well, chew on this: the Talking Heads are currently celebrating their 10th anniversary. In 1975, singer/songwriter/guitarist Byrne, drummer Chris Frantz and bassist Tina Weymouth formed Talking Heads after arriving in New York from the Rhode Island School of Design, a prestigious Providence art school. The group's early gigs at CBGB's, a Bowery bar, attracted

Photo by Linda Matlow/Pix

much press attention. Together with other minimalist bands like the Ramones, Blondie and Television, the band found itself at the vanguard of the movement dubbed "punk rock" or "new wave."

In 1977 the Heads recruited ex-Modern Lover Jerry Harrison on guitar and keyboards and released their first album, which included the FM hit "Psycho Killer." The next year the quartet teamed up with producer Brian Eno for a collaboration that would last three LPs. Along the way they stretched out to encompass modern synth technology, ancient African tribal rhythms and much that was funky in between. By the end of their collaboration with Eno, Talking Heads had expanded to include a shifting assortment of auxiliary musicians, mostly black and from a funk background. The songwriting, too, had become collaborative, with Byrne writing words and melodies on top of structures evolved from group jams.

Since 1980, the Heads have released only one studio album, 1983's *Speaking in Tongues*, which included "Burning Down the House." Meanwhile, Harrison released a solo LP, while Weymouth and Frantz—now married—had a couple of hits and a platinum album as the Tom Tom Club. Byrne collaborated with Eno on an experimental LP, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and composed music for choreographer Twyla Tharp's dance production *The Catherine Wheel*. The last few months have seen the release of *Stop Making Sense*, a film of a 1983 Talking Heads concert. The band and director Jonathan Demme (*Melvin and Howard*, *Handle with Care*) collaborated to hone three nights of performance into a carefully choreographed, exciting movie.

Shortly before Christmas, I met David Byrne on a Saturday afternoon in New York's Greenwich Village. He was coming from a meeting with Weymouth, Frantz and Harrison and heading toward a recording studio to mix tapes he made for *The Civil Wars*, a theater project by Robert Wilson for which Byrne composed music and helped design the staging. With *Stop Making Sense* a critical smash, director Demme has cast Byrne as an actor in an upcoming PBS program called *Survival Guides*, and the songwriter is working on a screenplay of his own.

A man sometimes characterized in the press as nervous, Byrne, 33, seemed confident and full of good humor. Perhaps some observers mistakenly assign nervousness to a quiet man whose mind moves faster than most.

Talking Heads have been together almost 10 years. When the band began I had the impression you were a creative man who might have gone in any of several artistic directions, but you chose pop music in order to get your ideas across to a wide audience.

That's true.

After 10 years as a musician, has that attitude changed?

I'm not complaining, but occasionally I wish I'd had time to do some of those other things, to do some of the artwork. I still do it, but I never have time to concentrate on it as much as the music. But it's coming. I get outlets for visual expression through directing videos, through working with Bob Wilson on his stage thing. So it's not so bad. It comes out one way or the other.

Will there be another Talking Heads studio album soon?

Yeah, yeah. I've been writing lots of what I call song sketches—essentially demos—on a Porta-studio. I'm real excited about them. Gosh, there's a lot of 'em. There's more than enough for a record. We can go in and record whenever everybody's ready. Jerry's working on a project of his own. Chris and Tina are rehearsing with the B-52s; they're going to play with them in South America just as a sort of on-off thing. So in the meantime I'll just write more songs. I'm kind of on a streak, so I'll just keep going.

When the band began, you would write the songs and bring them to the group. But after the band expanded you'd write songs around jams and the credit became "David Byrne/Talking Heads." Will these new songs be back to being credited just to you?

I think the band brings a lot to the songs. So in the interest of keeping that happening I try to bring to the band just the bare bones of a song, what sounds like a folk song. I sit down and plunk out chords at the piano and sing, with just a rhythm thing keeping metronome time. It doesn't

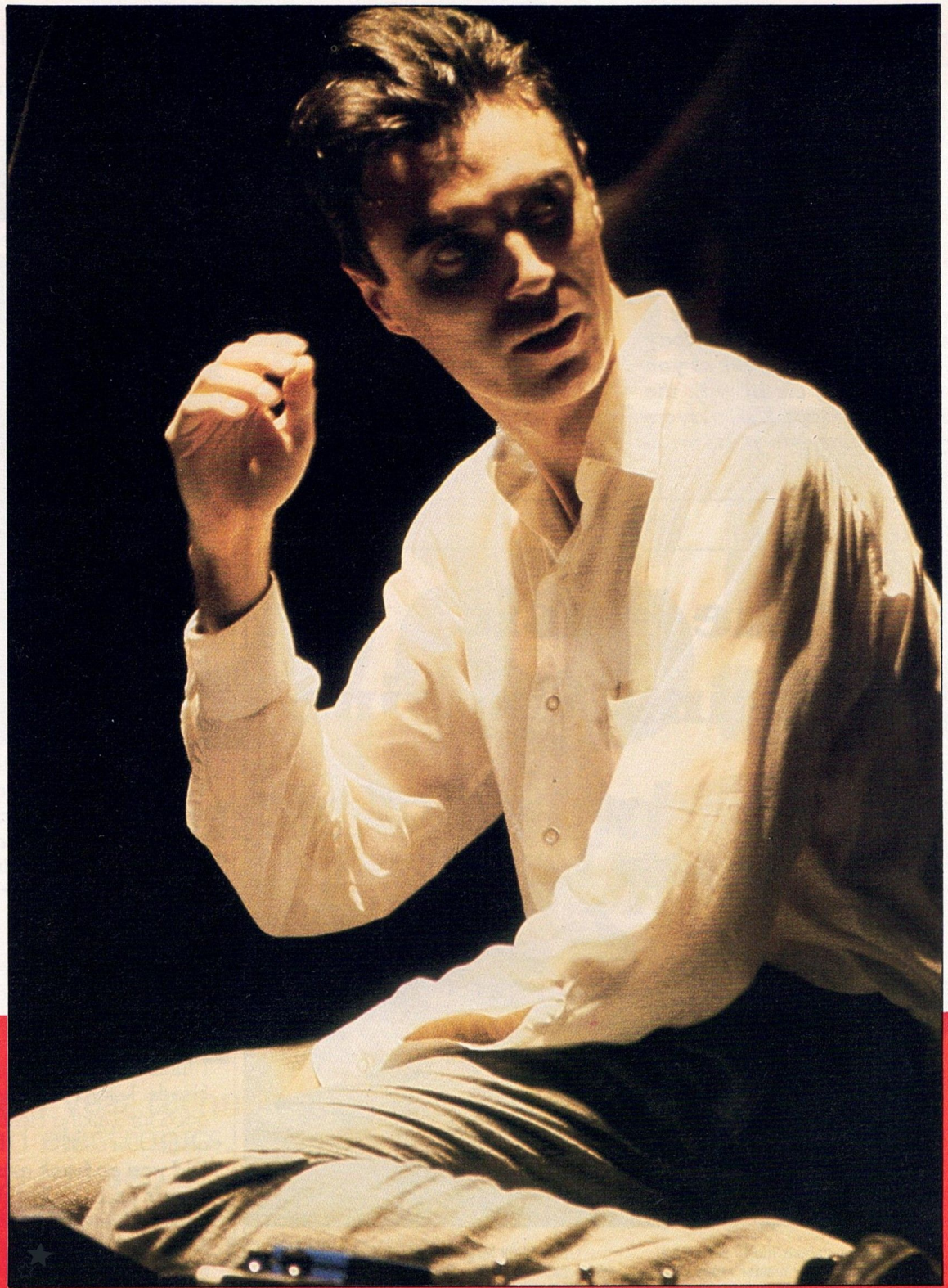

Photo by Michael Putland/Retna

"I had Alice Cooper in mind when I wrote 'Psycho Killer.' I wanted it to be like Randy Newman doing Alice Cooper."

sound like much. I could spend a lot more time working out guitar parts and bass lines. But I feel we should do that as a band, so that the contributions the band makes will still happen.

We'll probably work on a few numbers as we have been: all jamming and seeing what we come up with. I kind of switched to this way of writing because the words are little vignettes or stories, almost the way they used to be. We couldn't just jam and then stick those words on. I really have to write the melody to the words.

If you write the words, the melody and the chords, it's generous of you to share composing credit with the band. In most groups the players come up with their own parts without getting such credit.

But to some extent a song can change considerably from that point to when it's finally recorded. When I grew up and first started hearing rock music, pop and soul, it was the *sound* that really struck me. The words were, for the most part, pretty stupid. But it was the sound, the texture of the guitars and drums, the way one song sounded completely different than another. The texture a group of musicians arrives at, in support of melody or lyrics, can be at least as important as the melody line or whatever. It can make a statement that supports or contradicts it.

I listened to some of our old stuff last week and was surprised by how convoluted some of the chord changes were. Some of the recent stuff's a lot simpler. On the last couple of records there are hardly any chord changes at all through most of the songs. A lot of them kind of groove on in the same key from beginning to end, which was a challenge at the time. It was an exciting idea: "Hey! You can write a song and never play a chord change!" Just play different parts, change textures, change vocal melodies and people won't even notice you've disobeyed what I thought was a *rule* of songwriting.

Are your new songs back to using more chord changes?

Yeah. It's fun because I discovered there are lots of regular song structures and melodies I love to just sing to myself when I'm in the shower or whatever. I thought, "Well, that's what I like; I should try writing some."

Do you ever try to write in the style of another person? "Swamp" sounds like John Lee Hooker and Howlin' Wolf.

It wasn't intentional. We were just playing around with it and I loved what we came up with. I started "Heaven" trying to sound like Neil Young. I was listening to *Zuma* and *Tonight's the Night*. There were some great songs on that record.

You say that by sharing credit, you make sure the contribution the band makes will still happen. That implies that if you didn't share credit it might not, that they might hold back ideas for their own projects.

That's possible, too. Gee, I really didn't mean it that way. I never thought about that. It hadn't occurred to me that people would do that. Because I know I don't. The things I do for my solo stuff are things I think are totally unsuitable to Talking Heads. I don't think [laughs], "This is too good for Talking Heads, they're not gonna get this one!"

***Did you go back and overdub instruments on* Stop Making Sense?**

Yeah, there were some. Not that many for the film. More for the record. For the film we couldn't do very many 'cause it'd be out of sync—you'd see it. Plus, in the theater there was an excitement about seeing it and hearing it as it was, with the mistakes and everything.

On "Girlfriend Is Better" in the movie, Tina's playing bass on a keyboard, but on the soundtrack album, it sounds like a real bass had been dubbed.

That's possible. Our attitude on the live record was we wanted to make it sound as good as possible—like a record. Our feeling was that we didn't have to go with what was played on that night. What was important was to keep the *excitement* of

what was happening live. Anything we could do to enhance that was forgivable.

I was impressed with how your voice held up. Do you do any vocal exercises?

No. I did for a little while, but I stopped. I think it's just attitude. As I got more confident my throat didn't tense up as much when I sang, so I did less damage to my throat. I do pretty well, but occasionally I finish a show with a pretty raspy voice. I'm still in awe of people like Bruce Springsteen who can sing for three or four hours and still keep going.

You've brought a lot of new ideas to pop music. But do you find some ideas that just don't fit? Are there things you can't express in a song?

Uh-huh. I find it very difficult to express political ideas in a song. My ideas tend to focus on very specific situations. For instance, in my opinion the government of Chile is a puppet of American corporations. That's not a thing that's easy to put into a song. It's very topical and it's very specific. There's other things, too: people's attitudes about hairdos and clothes. Real specific things that everybody thinks about. They impinge on your life, you spend time thinking about it, you have very strong opinions on it. But I haven't been able to put them into a song.

Are you put off by the Clash's approach: to just sing, "The government in Chile is a puppet of American corporations"?

I completely identify with their sympathies and their point of view, but I feel as musicians they're somewhat obligated to . . . They haven't done as much for me musically as I would have liked. Probably naively, I've always felt that if you have radical political ideas or forward-looking social ideas, then that should be coupled with what you do musically; that your art should be as forward-looking as whatever else you're trying to say.

But more and more I'm thinking that's not exactly true. If you're going to communicate a sentiment like that and want to reach the largest number of people, the best way to do that would be to put it in an ordinary rock or pop song. If you want to reach the largest number of people, you should make it sound like Julio Iglesias.

Some of your songs can be seen as musically forward-looking, even radical, but lyrically reassuring, even conservative. I'm thinking, for example, way back to "Don't Worry About the Government." You put across very nice sentiments like, "If you come over I'll put down what I'm doing/My friends are important."

Yeah. If that was put into some more conventional song, if it had a slightly different melody and arrangement, just about anybody could have sung it. That song was about the *contrast* between the lyrics and the music. If you just read the lyrics it wouldn't have the same impact.

One result of that, though, is that people may take as tongue-in-cheek songs that aren't meant to be.

That song was heartfelt. I could completely identify with wanting a cozy modern place to live with all the conveniences. And I value friends as much as anyone does. There's a lot of truth to those things that are considered cliches. Just because they sound corny or aren't commonly expressed in rock & roll songs doesn't mean I can't sympathize with them. I guess more than believing in them, it's a matter of sympathizing with them.

Do people miss the humor in your songs?

I think this concert film helped out a lot that way, 'cause you can see the humor close up.

"If you want to reach the largest number of people, you should make it sound like Julio Iglesias."

Maybe it's just because I'm from Providence and I share some of that sense of humor and slang, but the first time I heard "Psycho Killer" I thought it was pretty funny. And then I read lots of people who took it seriously: "Uh-oh, this guy's exploring dangerous terrain here."

I had Alice Cooper in mind when I wrote that. I wanted it to be like Randy Newman doing Alice Cooper. You find out how songs have been received and it affects what you do later on. I can't pretend that I just do it and then ignore it. If a song has a little touch of humor in it and that doesn't get across, I figure something's wrong with the way I did it: it's not coming across the way it was intended. So next time I'll try a different approach. Or if a song is meant to be beautiful in a melancholy way and people tell me it comes across as angst-ridden, it's not coming across as I intended. I'd better modify it.

Do you ever get afraid of exposing too much of yourself in a song?

No, because I never feel I'm being that personal. I'm glad. It's a common assumption I guess about most people who write songs that they're speaking from personal experience. And I guess I am. But there's lots of fears and joys I've experienced that I don't think I'd ever write about. They seem much too personal to me.

But isn't that an obligation of the artist—to expose a bit of himself so his audience might get a bit closer to themselves?

That's true to an extent. I think there are ways to do it so that it has some sort of broader meaning than "Here I am, spilling my guts to you." I worked with Fun Boy Three in England. A lot of the songs we worked on were like that; they were personal experiences. Terry [Hall] wrote a song called "Well Fancy That" about being molested by his teacher on a school trip to France. I didn't pick up on it the first time I heard it, but the second time it was pretty clear that's what it was about. Later I learned it had really happened. This was a true experience he had never told anyone about—but he had written it as a song! He didn't tell his friends, he didn't tell his mum, he didn't tell dad, but *he's going to tell everyone*.

I thought that was pretty brave and probably more than I could do. I thought it was, for what it is, a wonderful song dealing with a very touchy subject. Gosh, but I don't think I could do it.

You're now in a position where you could just put out David Byrne albums, or call any group of musicians you hired Talking Heads. Why maintain a band at all?

Good question. At the moment, anyway, it seems like everybody contributes something. Sometimes it's pretty intangible. Sometimes it's just advice or a point of view or a comment. Like saying, "That doesn't sound right there" or "It sounded better the way you sang it before." We've been around one another long enough that we can say things like that without risking offense. Other times it's specific things, like a great bass part Tina comes up with. Some things are specific; some are pretty intangible.

I was saying today, when I was talking to the band, that none of us are incredibly gifted musicians, technically. We each have our own style we're good at. That might lend itself. But more than anything else there's a kind of confluence of sensibilities that sometimes clicks. Sometimes it's kind of rough, but a lot of times it clicks.

I guess that was our attitude from the start: that there might be a chance bands like ourselves and some of the others who were around at the time could compete with the big boys. We could never compete in terms of musicianship—you could always find a better guitar player. But it would be difficult to put together a group of people and have the same kind of thing result. At least, that's been the working assumption. ◐